DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 382 313 PS 022 958

AUTHOR Firlik, Russell J.
TITLE Reggio Emilia, Italy Preschools: The Synergies of Theory and Practice.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Environment; *Educational Philosophy; Educational Psychology; *Educational Theories; Foreign Countries; Preschool Children; *Preschool Education; Preschool Teachers; Student Projects; Teacher Attitudes; *Theory Practice Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Dewey (John); Gardner (Howard); Isaacs (Susan); *Reggio Emilia Approach

ABSTRACT

Drawing from several weeks of observation and study in Northern Italian preschools, this paper links practices in Reggio Emilia with the theoretical constructs of John Dewey, Susan Isaacs, and Howard Gardner. Part 1 presents background about the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, which are unique both in their respect for the space created for children to help them organize their environment and foster social and cognitive relationships, and in their highly trained and dedicated personnel. Part 2 aligns the philosophical and psychological perspectives of Dewey, Isaacs, and Gardner, with observable classroom practices. This section indicates that: (1) the influences of Dewey can be seen in Reggio Emilia preschools' concern and respect for the individual child, recognition that everyone involved affects each child and his or her individual disposition, and success in building a miniature community of learners; (2) Susan Issac's influences can be seen in the "child-sensitive" schools of Reggio Emilia, which use movement to interpret learning and express understanding, and which utilize child-sized, movable furniture; and (3) Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is reflected in Reggio Emilia's emphasis on in-depth student projects and on developing the sense of self. A chart comparing Dewey, Isaacs, and Gardner on early childhood education theories is included. (AC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED 382 313

"Reggio Emilia, Italy Preschools: The Synergies of Theory and Practice"

Russell J. Firlik

Abstract

This paper identifies and applies, through examples, some of the theoretical proves that promote and accommodate the constructivist foundations for the sound educational practices observed in the preschool classrooms of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Through the clarification of the relationship-thinking promoted by three educational theoreticians (John Dewey, Susan Issacs, and Howard Gardner), American practitioners might be better able to understand some of the significant underpinnings of the Reggio Emilian psycho-social philosophy. It is maintained that this firm grounding in theory leads naturally to the quality early childhood practices that I, and other Americans, observed in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

If the aim of education is to be identified with development, both moral and intellectual, then Reggio Emilian practices are successful because they have incorporated, over an evolution of forty years, the philosophies and psychologies of many theorists and applied them successfully into the pedagogy of their preschool classrooms.

R.J.Firlik

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Russell J. Firlik
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

PS 022958

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Reggio Emilia, Italy Preschools: The Synergies of Theory and Practice

> There can be no practice without theory; and there can be no sound practice without sound theory; and not to get one's meaning clarified is to risk diminishing the quality of one's practice. (Blenkin & Kelly. 1992)[1].

Reggio Emilia, a small city in the north of Italy (population 130,000), has over many decades, developed an early childhood educational paradigm which could perhaps provide a practical guide for early childhood education in the United States. After observing and studying the preschools which NEWSWEEK magazine (1991) [2] refers to as "the best early childhood programs in the world," I am eager to identify the relationships of some theoretical "proves" that provide and promote the constructivist foundations for the sound educational practices observed in the classrooms of Reggio Emilia. By linking theory to practice, hopefully, American educators will be better able to more fully understand Reggio Emilia's philosophical and psychological underpinnings that lead naturally to quality early childhood practices. The purpose of this manuscript is to reinterept, from my several weeks of observations and study in Reggio Emilia's preschools, many practical classroom examples that have direct implications to the theoretical constructs of these educational thinkers and theoreticians: John Dewey, Susan Issacs, and Howard Gardner. The late Professor Loris Malaguzzi, founder and leader of the Reggio Emilia

PS 022958

Experience, observed, studied, synthesized, and put-into-practice many theories and practices that built the impressive scaffolding for the philosphical-psychological structures that are the very foundations of the preschools (ages 3-6 years) of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Only when American practitioners recognize, revisit, reinterpret and understand the philosophical/psychological underpinnings of the Reggio Emilia Experience can we expect practitioners to embrace and "look at their own settings with different eyes." For this vision, we must study the deep rooted rationale for and the evolution of the Reggio's child-centered practices. I choose these "contemporary" educational thinkers because they are within our practical research vision, reading experiences, and they have all had significant and unique perspectives that Malaguzzi accepted and embellished, along with many other theories, in establishing the sound practices that I observed in the Reggio Emilia preschool classrooms.

PART I: BACKGROUND ABOUT THE PRESCHOOLS OF REGGIO EMILIA, ITALY

Reggio Emilia is in a wealthy region of northern Italy well known for its agricultural and industrial productivity as well as its art and architecture. During the late 1970's and into the 1990's, the preschools (3-6 years), under the leadership of Loris Malaguzzi, and the Infant and

Toddler Centers run by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia have provided important, well-documented and widely used point of contact for international study and research in Italy. Since 1979, international interest in Reggio Emilia schools has been demonstrated by foreign delegations from Cuba, Denmark, England, Japan, South Korea, Mozambique, United States, Switzerland and Sweden.

Reggio Emilia's schools are unique do to their respect for both the space created for children to assist them in organizing their environment and fostering social and cognitive relationships and their highly trained and dedicated personnel utilized in their schools. In addition to educators, the schools have direct access to child development experts (pedogogisti), and atelieristas or art directors.

From its inception, Reggio Emilia has always relied on an enthusiastic corps of parents and members of the community to share in the running of the schools. Reggio's longstanding commitment to cooperative home and school relationships is significantly valued by everyone involved.

Reggio Emilia, with its well-subsidized social services, have twenty-two community preschools serving 49% of all three-six year old children and thirteen infant/toddler centers serving 37% of those under the age of three. In Reggio, counting also private and state preschools,

preschool education reaches 98% of the children from 3 to 6 years. 3

PART II: ALIGNING PHILOSOPHICAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES TO OBSERVABLE CLASSROOM PRACTICES IN REGGIO EMILIA.

Perspectives of Professor John Dewey

The immediate impact of probably American's most influential philosopher, John Dewey, are very visible everywhere in the Reggio Emilia early childhood classrooms. Dewey refocused education from a state of a block of information to be presented to the student by the teacher to the child as the center of all learning. His focus contended that education's purpose is to notice the child as the subject of education and the one who is being educated. The child's individual growth and makeup will be a major aspect of education. As Dewey states, "A child's life is an integral, a total one...The things that occupy him (her) are held together in unity of the personal and social interests which his (her) life carries along. 4

Reggio Emilia's preschools acknowledge this concern for the individual and is reflected in the recognition that all of those involved with the children have a relationship that impacts upon each child and their individual dispositions. In Reggio Emilia there is a conscious recognition that all of the macro society, and what happens there, impacts

directly or indirectly on the child. For example, from community members, staff members including cooks, cleaning personnel, teachers and parents, all have an important relationship role to play in the child-centered system. Historically, parents have had and continually to have, an important function within the educational setting and the school (the micro culture), by bringing the (macro) society and its influences into activity. Dewey exemplifies this recognition of relationships this way:

> The vital ties of affection, the connecting bonds of activity, hold together the variety of his (her) personal experiences. The adult mind...cannot realize the amount of separating and reformulating which the facts of direct experience have to undergo before they an appear as a "study" or branch of learning. 5

Children in the Reggio Emilia preschools are viewed with profound respect. They value children as influential and contributing members of the society. The affection with which they are held is evident in the entire organization of the school (Firlik, 1993). I have observed the respect by teachers and other staff for children by the manner in which adults communicate with the children, listen and react to their feelings and thinking. Moreover, respect is evident in the total environment that naturally fosters children to interact with the materials in their settings. Meaning making is constructed as children, through direct first-hand experiences, actively participate in their environment. Dewey explains,

"The child is the starting point, the center and the end...self-realization is the goal".6

The belief that the child is the center of the learning process is stated over and over again by the staff members of Reggio Emilia. It is evident in the design of the buildings and piazza's, the carefully valued panels of documentation and displays (Firlik,Firlik 1993), and tenet is omnipresent in the manner in which children's interests (or teachers) are brought to life in the schools and represented in various and unique modes of expression.

When preschool children, three to six years of age, discuss an interest, idea, or form hypotheses, there is no subordination of the child in relation to the emerging curriculum. To the contrary, it is the experiences children bring to and all the involvements they experience at school that places the child at the center of the process. Dewey reminds us that "the source of whatever is dead, mechanical, and formal in schools is found precisely in the subordination of the life and experience of the child to the curriculum." 7

The starting point of any new experience is masterfully analyzed by the adults and children in Reggio Emilia preschools. This is noteworthy because teachers through careful observation and recording acknowledge and utilizes children's prior knowledge as the potential for new learning.

The centrality of the teacher's belief lays in the fact that within the child's prior experiences contains the connections (sparks) needed to formulate deeper and lasting relationships and understandings. This is perhaps a major component in the way "education" takes an active place in the preschools of Reggio Emilia. The teacher acts as questioner, researcher and provacateur as the children explore, practice and expand their experiences to reach higher levels of relationship-thinking. The following statement from Dewey is clearly evidenced in the teaching/learning process of Reggio Emilia preschools: "It is the continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies." 8

In The School and Society, Dewey further provides foundations for the kind of school-culture found in the Reggio Emilia preschools when he stated:

> (The results of)... active occupation is that through them the entire spirit of the school is renewed. It has a chance to affiliate with life, to become the child's habitat, where he (she) learns through directed living, instead of being only a place to learn lessons... It gets a chance to be a miniature community, and embryonic society. 9

Preschools in Reggio Emilia succeed in developing a miniature community of learners. Children and staff work as co-equals, build honest relationships, strengthen each other's interests, and learn to work

together in a peaceful, communal way. The sense of aliveness that is evident at each of the preschools give testimony to the school's confidence in active engagement and to the relevance of practical social experiences. These practical life experiences are observed in various learning settings, both in-door and out.

One observes the reality of Dewey's belief that working together sets free the powers of the one helped. Each child is helped and set free by collaborative relationships. For example -small groups of children working together, some children writing notes to each other and placing them in the communication boxes (individual mail boxes), or debating and discussing an idea or topic of interest -these activities were common place in each of the classrooms.

Upon visiting several preschool classrooms in Reggio Emilia one is stuck by the lack of traditional discipline in terms of control and obedience. Dewey also writes about discipline in this way:

> It is only when a narrow and fixed image of traditional school discipline dominates that one is in any danger of overlooking that deeper and infinitely wider discipline that comes from having a part to do in constructive work, in contributing to a result which, social in spirit, is none the less obvious and tangible in form...10

While the "reform movement" in the United States generally pays little attention to John Dewey, it is heart warming and encouraging to see that Reggio Emilia preschools, through its values and practices, has

indeed reinterpreted, embellished and embraced Dewey's ideas.

Susan Issacs' Perspectives

Susan Issacs, from the United Kingdom, was an outstanding teacher, psychologist, and therapist. During the 1920's and 1930's, Issacs' influence on the theory and practice of nursery-infant education in England was gained through her work at the Malting House School, from studies of child development, and research about the genesis of emotional disturbances. Issacs recognized and utilized the profound spiritual and intellectual enlightenment that psychoanalytic theory and practice were able to throw upon the outward behavior of young children.

Susan Issac's work had two interrelated features; vigorous and careful observations and recording of the classroom life of young children, and the development of a distinctive pedagogy derived from her teaching. Drawing principally on Freud's work on the importance of early childhood autonomy, she was also influenced by both Froebel and Montessori. Susan Issacs encouraged children to "find out for themselves" rather than rely on the authority and knowledge of the teacher.

Susan Issac's believed that learning must be active and experiential, and this influence is evidenced in the "child-sensitive" schools of Reggio Emilia .

She stated:

> The children themselves are the living aim and end of our teaching. It is their thought, their knowledge, their character and development which makes the purpose of our existence as schools and teachers. And it is the modes of their learning and understanding, their physical growth and social needs, which in the end determine the success or failure of our methods of teaching.12

One of the basic observations I have of the Reggio Emilia school community is that schools are to be as child-sensitive as possible. I mean, the manner in which teachers respond to the individual children and move easily with the children into avenues of exploration are daily evidence of the belief in practice that children and their individual needs are the basis for the educational setting in Reggio Emilia. Teachers are responsive to individual needs as the children reveal themselves in the discussions and conversations. This responsiveness to children shows up in the emerging curriculum that meets developmental growth objectives and are most often directed by the children themselves.

Susan Issacs speaks of the need of children to speak in the classroom and to use spoken language as a means of aiding in children's understanding and growth. In addition, for Issacs, the need for movement in young children is absolutely necessary for full development. She does not mean that there should be planned movement periods which are stuck between mental work, but rather that movement shall be integral within

the educational practices of the school. Children will be feel free to talk and move openly in the classroom, moving from area to area, gathering the needed materials to complete a task or start a project. Movement, for Issacs, was to be used to express understanding and to interpret learning. I observed on several occasions that dance, puppets, and shadow - movement were used to interpret that which was being discovered, and, concomitantly, reinterpreted later through other languages of expression or "Hundred Languages of Children."

Susan Issacs believed also that the classroom should not have furniture which is affixed to the floor. Rather, she concluded, that light movable equipment and furniture be arranged so that the children can get the furniture and equipment themselves and be individually responsible for keeping it in order. Furthermore, children should have easy access to quality materials and various supplies. This was a discipline and a form of classroom organization built upon the active sharing of work and play- all making for social control in the classroom.

In Reggio Emilia all of the furniture is child-size and movable. There are many pillows and pads available for floor sitting. Children have ready access to high quality materials that they may need. These materials and supplies are stored in clear plastic bins where the contents are visible for the children to see what they need, are attractively

arranged, and are stored on easily reached shelves.

Susan Isaacs voiced doubts, as does Loris Mallaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia Experience, about Piaget's early experimental work on egocentrism. She questioned how far the kind of "ego-centric" behavior described by Piaget was specific to his experimental situations and how far it extended to the everyday learning of the child in the classrooms and outside. Issacs suggested that the difference between adults and children was not that the former do not reason or that they only reason in the form of perceptual judgment or practical manipulation, but that the children's reasoning, which is essentially based on their personal problems, has less need for clear verbal formulation. Various situations in the Reggio Emilia classrooms related to Issacs' questioning of Piaget's egocentrism were noted. For example, the use of mirrors behind the tables where block construction takes place. These long mirrors were consciously placed there so that children, even as young as three and four years, could naturally gain multiple perspectives of the construction going on the other side. In Piaget's famous mountain example, children could not visualize who or what was on the other side of the mountains. Reggio children were adapting and accommodating to take another perspective. Another example of promoting social-centric behavior that I observed was the careful placement of mirrors in trees and on the tile floors on the outside

courtyard. As one child indicated, "I like to dance on clouds." Another stated, "I can see the bottom of birds". Yet another five year old said, "I can see up my dress." Issacs' would say that:

> The extent to which egocentric attitude dominates the behavior of any given group will depend partly upon age-it is the typical attitude of children under four years; partly upon social experience-many children of five or six may show it if they have not had much to do with other children, or if their temperaments are naturally less adaptable; and partly upon the day and the mood and the particular setting-under the stress of a strong desire or a vividly conceived purpose, any young child may fall into this attitude on occasion.13

In a class of five year olds, a female classmate, was standing ever so still like an Italian sculpture. Several children were placed at difference positions around the model and were required to draw her. Some had the front, some the sides, and some the back. After about forty-five minutes the children were adjusting to different perspectives and expressing their interpretations in some very interesting drawings.

Howard Gardner's Perspectives

Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences offers an intriguing theory for classroom practice everywhere. I observed and noted children engaged in "multiple intelligence opportunity-activities," where their intelligences, defined by Gardner as, "the ability to find and solve

problems, or to fashion products, which are valued in one or more cultural setting." 14 were being operationalized. These isolated or combined forms of "intelligences" were being expressed linguistically, in logical/mathematical forms, spatial or visual representation, musically or kinesthetically. Gardner, who has been involved with the Reggio Emilia Experience for over a decade, points out that intelligent behavior varies from culture to culture. He writes about two other intelligences called personal intelligences-interpersonal and intrapersonal. It was these personal connections that I was most impressed with in observing the classrooms of Reggio Emilia. In a recent book entitled, "The Hundred Languages of Children," children are respected for all the ways- hundreds of ways- in which they are endowed to express their powers of creativity, intelligence, and unlimited potentials.

Reggio Emilia's value of and emphasis on projects is noteworthy. In Reggio Emilia children are not bound by time and with more time offered deeper understandings and relationships are formulated. Projects are typically based on children's interests, learned and appreciated through active engagement, and are relevant and meaningful to the life experiences of the children. Engagement in projects, either child initiated or teacher directed, automatically fosters the strengths within the seven intelligence data base. With appropriate modeling, through

practice, you eventually develop a deeper understanding. Gardner says, "...I was trying to persuade them to become interested in understanding, to seek to foster musical intelligence. These were not to be conveyed in a few minutes chat."15 By this he acknowledges that the many intelligences take time to develop and require much experimentation and participation in order to accomplish a full and useful development of the intelligences.

As children of Reggio Emilia delved into the study of the lions in the market square they actively participated for many months in: lion dancing, sculpting the lions, play acting like lions, making clay lions, and drawing-painting lions. The interest in lions in the square initiated discussion about the qualities and the properties of the lions and how important their ever presence in the square was appreciated by the city people. Several months later, a detailed video " To make a Portrait of a Lion" depicting the children's process within project was produced by the City of Reggio Emilia, Italy and it has been shown all over the world.

There is a considerable emphasis on developing the sense of self in Reggio Emilia. "But a child's most sought-after goal is to recognize her or himself in others, and in others (objects and the natural world as well) to see parts of himself."16 Perhaps this understanding is incorporated in the Reggio Emilia Experience which seeks to develop those intelligences

Gardner calls, personal (connectedness with other persons). Photos, self sculptures/portraits, dance, movement, shadow drama, videos are integral at Reggio Emilia preschools. It is their belief and practice that in order to develop the personal intelligence children must have a strong sense of self. One child stated to me, through the interrupter, "When I look at myself, it is as if I see another person that I like."

Conclusions:

What I believe to be the most significant aspect of my experiencing in the Reggio Emilia learning community has been the observable pedagogical applications that seem to be inextricably linked with many philosophical and psychological relationships, but, particularly those of Dewey, Issacs, and Gardner. These universal teaching/learning practices are evidenced in the Reggio Emilia classrooms and outside the four walls of the classrooms as well. **(Chart 1 here.)**

How do American educational practitioners recognize and utilize what Reggio Emilia has accomplished over this forty years of development? The nature of the learners are the starting and ending point of the continuum. The learners are knowingly and continuously constructing, co-constructing, and reconstructing their knowledge base through direct experiences. In addition, because of the various

opportunities afforded the learner to develop their multiple intelligences and the fact that the culture of Reggio Emilia places such a high value on the development of these intelligences- the individual learner no doubt is awakened to certain emotional affiliation to these active experiences. These are then "educative experience" that will relate to subsequent ones and promote growth. These conditions of opportunity and the ethos of the community to value experiences that will lead to the development of modes of multiple intelligences are indeed alive and functioning well in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

Moreover, if the aim of education is to be identified with development, both moral and intellectual, then the children must be valued for themselves and the powerful creative potential each possess. As part of the Italian culture, the child is always respected, has specific rights, and must be understood as an equal member of the entire community- any community of learners.

Roland S. Barth reminds us that "whether we are called teachers, principals, professors, or parents, our primary responsibility is to promote learning in others and in ourselves. That is what it means to be an educator." 17 As educators, we must recognize the interrelationships between theories and practices or we "risk diminishing the quality of one's practice."

Endnotes

1. Blenkin and Kelly, ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION, P.1.
2. NEWSWEEK, 1991. P.51.
3. Municipality of Reggio Emilia, Department of Education, HISTORICAL OUTLINE DATA AND INFORMATION, P.7.
4. Dewey, THE CHILD AND THE CURRICULUM, P.5
5. Dewey, Ibid, P.6
6. Dewey, Ibid, P.9
7. Dewey, Ibid, p.9
8. Dewey, Ibid, p.11
9. Dewey, J. THE SCHOOL AND SOCIETY, p.18
10. Dewey, Ibid, p. 17
11. Issacs, S. THE CHILDREN WE TEACH, p.11
12. Silberman, C. THE OPEN CLASSROOM READER, p.179
13. Issacs,S. THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN, p.213
14. Gardner, H. TO OPEN MINDS, p. 113
15. Gardner, Ibid, p. 231
16. HUNDRED LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN, p. 36
17. Barth, R. Quotes from Building a Community of Learners, presentation to Connecticut educators in January, 1994.

References

Barth, R. Quotes from "Building a Community of Learners." Presentation to Connecticut educators in January 1994.

Blenkin, G., Kelly, A. ASSESSMENT IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION. Paul Chapman Publishing, Ltd., London, England, 1992

Campbell, R.J. THE ROUTLEDGE COMPENDIUM OF PRIMARY EDUCATION. Routledge Education, London, England, 1988.

Department of Education, Municipality of Reggio Emilia. A HISTORICAL OUTLINE: DATA AND INFORMATION. June, 1992.

Department of Education, Municipality of Reggio Emilia. THE HUNDRED LANGUAGES OF CHILDREN. 1987.

Dewey, J. THE CHILD AND THE CURRICULUM. University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London, Eleventh Impression, 1971.

Dewey, J. THE SCHOOL AND SOCIETY. University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London, Eleventh Impression, 1971.

Firlik, R. "Similarities between early childhood education in Oxfordshire, England and Reggio Emilia, Italy." Dimensions of Early Childhood, Vol. 22, No. 1, Fall, 1993.

Firlik, E., Firlik, R. "The Role of Display in the Preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy." Holistic Education Review, Vol. 6, No. 4, Winter 1993.

Gardner, H. TO OPEN MINDS. Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, New York, 1989.

Hinckle, P. "The Ten Best Schools in the World. NEWSWEEK, Dec. 21, 1991.

Issacs, S. THE CHILDREN WE TEACH, Second Edition, University of London Press, 1967.

Issacs, S. THE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG CHILDREN. Schocken Books, New York, 1972.

Silberman, C. THE OPEN CLASSROOM READER. Vintage Books, Random House, New York. 1973.

(Chart 1)

The relationships between John Dewey, Susan Issacs and Howard Gardner to early childhood education

	DEWEY	ISSACS	GARDNER
Active Learning	Direct Experience	Social & Kinesethic Activities	Opportunities to use Multiple Intelligence
Nature of the Learner	Continuous Reconstruction of Knowledge	Recognition of Physical,Social-Emotional Needs	Powerfully Creative, Unlimited Potential
Multiple Intelligence	Child is Total Being	Movement & Speech Needs to be Included	What Education Should Reflect
Aim of Education	Identified with Development, both Moral & Intellectual	Children are Valued for Themselves and What they bring with Them	Recognize and Give Voice to More Application of Multiple Intelligences
Democratic/ Community Functioning	Child is Social and Works There	Child is Responsible for Setting and Maintenance	Intelligence of each Person and Group Membership